



## ARTICLE

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# What's in a name? Re-conceptualizing non-state armed groups in the Middle East

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**ABSTRACT** In recent decades, the role and status of non-state armed groups (NSAGs)—generally defined as armed organizations operating outside the control of the state and willing and able to use force to achieve their objectives—has attracted growing scholarly and policy interest; mirroring these groups' seemingly more prominent role in both war-making and post-conflict transitions. This is especially the case when it comes to the contemporary Middle East and North Africa, where a combination of state fragility, conflict and instability has further enhanced the military, political and social importance of NSAGs. But is there a mismatch between the organizational evolution of some NSAGs and the conceptual framework adopted to describe and analyze them? How can recognizing these limitations help better conceptualizing and analyzing violent non-state organizations? In the Middle East, organizations like Hamas or Hezbollah operate simultaneously as sophisticated armed organizations, complex political entities and as highly developed social movement organizations involved in administering and delivering social services at the grassroots level. Elsewhere in the region, the rise of the "Islamic State" offers an entirely distinct example of a socio-political project established by an actor commonly defined as a NSAG. Despite the significant ideological, organizational and strategic differences between these organizations, all three actors fall broadly within the "non-state armed groups" category. Yet, both in their use of armed force, as well in their relationship with the state, these organizations appear as characterized by multi-layered identities and strategies that defy simple labelling. Moreover, these groups' different roles as alternative providers of governance *de facto* blur the line between state and non-state actor and create an evolving dynamic that simultaneously challenges, contests and redefines concepts like statehood and sovereignty. The article analyzes the organizational evolution of these three actors and, in doing so, it problematizes and challenges the way we currently conceptualize and think about non-state actors in general and non-state armed groups more specifically. This article is published as part of a collection on analyzing security complexes in a changing Middle East.

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## The evolving role of non-state actors in the Middle East and North Africa region

Non-state actors, including transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations and inter-governmental institutions are widely regarded as meaningful players in the international political arena, with whom states regularly cooperate and, at times, compete. In the past decades, NSAGs have similarly grown in status and importance. These actors are generally defined according to two main criteria: first, they are seen as organizations operating outside the control of the state and challenging its “authority, power, and legitimacy” (Petrasek, 2000). Second, they are characterized by their reliance on “violence and force, be it in unconventional and asymmetric ways” to achieve their objectives (Shultz, Farah and Lochard, 2004). These groups’ goals can be political, economic or ideological and their structure tends to include at least a minimal level of command and control and coordination, along with a clear group identity (Hofmann, 2006; McHugh and Bessler, 2006).

The world of non-state armed groups is vast and includes militias, terrorist organizations and insurgents, but it can be conceptually broadened to encompass international and domestic criminal groups, armed gangs or vigilantes (Rodgers and Muggah, 2009).

In the post-cold war era NSAGs have occupied increasingly more important roles, as the nature of war has changed, with internal conflicts between states and sub-states or among different non-state actors becoming the predominant model in modern warfare (van Creveld, 1991; Sarkees *et al.*, 2003). Weinstein (2003) argues: “Rebellion is easier to organize than it has ever been before. Weakened states, in economic crisis, are barely able to control their natural resources and administrative territories. Moreover, arms are inexpensive and accessible”.

Indeed, growing state fragility and the reallocation of state sovereignty at both the supra-national and sub-national level have contributed to eroding states’ capacity and effectiveness, whilst empowering non-state actors (Agnew, 2005; Menkhaus, 2006; Kaldor, 2007). In this context, non-state armed groups should not be seen solely as a security threat and a challenge to the state’s monopoly on the use of force. Indeed, increasingly more powerful non-state armed actors have been behind the creation of alternative systems of governance that are autonomous from the state and often competing with it (Rosenau, 2001).

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is especially interesting to explore variations in both the evolution of non-state actors and in models of alternative governance, especially in light of the complex social, political and economic developments set forth since the 2011 mass-mobilizations of the so-called “Arab Awakening”. The background context for the regional mobilizations, the shaky post-revolutionary transitions and the affirmation of “areas of limited statehood” (Risse, 2012) is deeply connected to many regional states’ colonial and post-colonial legacies of fragility, reflected in legitimacy, authority and capacity gaps (Ghani and Lockhart, 2008; Carment *et al.*, 2014). Across the Middle East, states’ legitimacy—both reflected in approval of and loyalty to the existing political institutions as well as in the existence of a shared sense of belonging to a common political community—has been undermined by a singular combination of colonial legacy, neo-patrimonialism, authoritarianism and policies of exclusion, which in turn eroded the bond between both the states and its citizens as well as between the different groups and communities that form the polity, laying the seeds for the rise of non-state challengers to the state and its institutions (Holsti, 1996; Herb, 1999; Bellin, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, MENA states have overall suffered from a governance deficit and from a limited ability to provide public goods, including security—while ensuring good governance and sustainable development (HDI,

2015; World Bank, 2015). In this context, some of the trends unleashed by the 2011 regional mobilization processes—including the further weakening of nation-state and centralized political institutions—are of particular significance to the development of alternatively governed areas. More in general, the combination of state fragility, rising particularism and widespread instability has redefined the security and political environment for states and NSAGs alike.

Within the MENA region, the actors that fall within the broad label of “non-state armed group” are many, with strong variations in the groups’ local or transnational orientation; in their level of military, political and social capabilities, as well as with respect to their territorial control and ability to govern. Furthermore, there are wide variations in terms of the different NSAGs’ identities, ideologies and objectives.

In this context of parallel state fragility and proliferation of NSAGs, it is vital to better understand these groups’ role and their potential impact on the regional order. Presently, NSAGs—and especially more sophisticated ones involved in rebel governance—play a key role in the ongoing regional conflicts and, as such, they are also highly relevant to both local and international humanitarian efforts. From the issue of gaining access to rebel-held areas to provide humanitarian assistance; to that of tackling distinct forms of violence against the civilian population; to ensuring the safety of the population displaced by conflict; to creating effective regimes to deal with trafficking and smuggling routes, it is apparent that understanding and engaging armed groups is increasingly more vital to both humanitarian and regional security operations.

But, as the number and nature of NSAGs operating in the region grows in number and complexity; it is worth reflecting on whether it is still legitimate to classify them all under the broad umbrella of “NSAG”—a term that highlights these actors’ opposition to the state—functionally and relationally—as well as their use of violence in unconventional and asymmetric ways (Capoccia, 2002; Shultz *et al.*, 2004).

To test the validity of the label and the main assumptions behind it; the article focuses on the use of force and the relationship with the state of three very different, yet all highly complex and institutionalized NSAGs: the Islamic State project, the Palestinian Hamas, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. These groups are chosen as paradigmatic cases to depict the political, social, military and organizational evolution of armed groups in the region.

At first glance, it is evident that these groups have substantially different organizational structures, strategies, objectives and ideologies while also operating in unique political, social and military environments. This diversity is not, and should not, be under-stated. In addition, these organizations represent three different NSAGs in three very distinct stages of development. At the one end of the spectrum, one can find the self-defined Islamic State—an anti-systemic actor pursuing a transnational agenda in the early stages of attempting to establish itself as a rebel ruler and a governance provider. At the opposite end of the spectrum, one can find Hezbollah, a highly cohesive and institutionalized organization with an integrated role in the Lebanese political arena; an autonomous, sophisticated and well-established governance network; and an extensively developed military apparatus. With Hamas resting somewhere in the middle of this idealized spectrum in terms of its organizational development, these three groups provide variation and depth, allowing to study the evolution of NSAGs in the region.

### From asymmetric to “hybrid”—what use for armed force?

The use of armed force is, according to the mainstream definitions of NSAGs, the key element that sets non-state armed

organizations apart from unarmed ones. But highlighting the role of armed force should not lead to disregard the fact that numerous armed groups are involved in multi-layered activities, extending to the social, political and economic realm. Indeed, when analyzing organizationally complex groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, or even the Islamic State, it is crucial to look beyond just the reliance on violence and to take into consideration the social, political and economic dimension of their activities. These non-armed practices are indeed crucial to these groups' strategies and identities.<sup>2</sup>

Hamas, for instance, has developed an extra-institutional socio-political movement and an institutional political party, becoming over the years active both at the extra-instructional grassroots level, as well as in the institutional political arena. Initially created to serve as the armed wing of the Gaza-based branch of the Muslim Brotherhood on the eve of the First Intifada in 1987; Hamas's political activism begun immediately after its creation, with the group involved in grassroots politics and in participating in non-political elections—including in universities and trade unions (Zahhar and Hijazi, 1995).

And whilst Hamas only officially decided to run as a political party in the 2004-2005 Palestinian municipal elections and in the 2006 legislative elections; in the years between 1987 and 2004 the group remained highly involved in Palestine's political life (Berti, 2013). In addition to its strong political identity, Hamas has also long administered a complex and sophisticated social movement and social services network; becoming directly involved in a number of social interventions, from health care, to education, to poverty alleviation and development (Roy, 2011). The level of development of Hamas's grassroots political activism, together with its provision of social services and its direct involvement in institutional politics make it easy to dismiss the notion that these activities are unimportant to the organization when compared to armed struggle. Even more interestingly, since winning the 2006 legislative elections and subsequently assuming control of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007, Hamas's involvement in the Palestinian political system further shifted from participation to direct control and governance. Needless to say, the group's evolution has stretched the definition of "armed group" well beyond its traditional boundaries.

Within Lebanon, Hezbollah—initially established in the early 1980s as an umbrella organization for Shiite-Islamist factions operating in the context of the Lebanese civil war and coming together to fight the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982—evolved to adopt a similar political, social and military character. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the group gradually became directly invested in establishing and running a complex social services network, engaging in charity, development and governance-related work. Whilst boosting its social movement identity and practices, Hezbollah also emerged as a political party in the post-civil war political arena, with the organization's political wing running in legislative and municipal elections. While preserving its military structure and its status as "national resistance," Hezbollah also gradually became a mainstream political party; a process accelerated by the 2005 Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, leading Hezbollah to increase its direct involvement in the political system by joining the executive cabinet (Alagha, 2005; Wiegand, 2009).

In the case of the establishment and administration of the Islamic State project, with the 2014 "official" proclamation of the Caliphate, the group expressed its belief to be the only legitimate political system—rejecting pre-existing states in the Levant and their borders—and asserted the concept that all Muslims are obliged to accept the religious and political authority of "Caliph Ibrahim" (Jabareen, 2015). IS's declared goals and military focus are of course inherent in its motto "baqiya wa tatamadad" (lasting

and expanding)—(Lister, 2014) reflecting the group's ambition to control the territory and population in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, the Caliphate project seeks to expand itself to the rest of the Levant and beyond, both directly as well as through the rise of local affiliates (Zelin, 2015). To achieve these objectives the group relied on governance and state-building, intense media and social media branding, as well as on extreme brutality and an overall offensive military doctrine (Fromson and Simon, 2015). What is more, ISIS's direct appropriation of state infrastructure, along with the setting up of political, social and economic institutions, the extraction of resources and the managing of security and delivery of basic social services further testify to IS's state-building aspirations, again well beyond the military dimension.

But while the importance of these groups' multi-layered social and political activities—beyond a narrow interpretation of "NSAGs" as solely military organizations—has been well documented by the existing scholarship; their use of force is still often analyzed on the basis of neatly fitting pre-established labels, including those of "terrorist" or insurgent' organization. Indeed, more in general, NSAGs are defined as relying on "violence and force, be it in unconventional and asymmetric ways". Yet, this prism may very well be inadequate when analyzing the chosen case studies.

Indeed, the organizational structure and violent activities of the examined groups do not neatly fit the traditional criteria commonly associated with terrorist organizations—the label most often used to describe these groups. Terrorism scholar Alex P. Schmid famously stated, after reviewing over a hundred definitions of terrorism, that:

"Terrorism is an abstract phenomenon of which there can be no real essence which can be discovered and described. (...) In the field of terrorism, there is no agreement about any single definition" (Schmid *et al.*, 1988: 110). Yet several recurring elements are useful in characterizing and distinguishing terrorism as a specific tactic: the use of "extra-normal" violence for a political purpose (Crenshaw, 2006); the deliberate targeting of civilians; the desire to willfully create or exploit fear (Ganor, 2005); and the intention to have a "far-reaching psychological effect beyond the immediate target of the attack" to "indirectly exert influence" (Shultz *et al.*, 2004; Berger, 2014).

Without disputing that Hezbollah, Hamas and more prominently ISIL have relied on terrorist tactics; still—based on this definition—it is possible to see how the "terrorism label" only describes some of these groups' tactics. At the most basic level, all these groups recurrently and significantly attack non-civilian targets,<sup>3</sup> while their use of force is not exclusively (or even predominantly) aimed at indirectly exerting influence; they all rely on force to control and defend territory, as well as to govern (Berger, 2014). Nor do these groups' organizational structures fit the classic definition of terrorist organizations, commonly seen as small, "conspiratorial" or underground organizations unable to hold territory or enjoy substantial popular support (Moghadam *et al.*, 2014). Hamas, Hezbollah and ISIL all have devised different political strategies and they invest significant portions of their time and political capital in *non-military* activities.

For these reasons, terrorism scholars such as Assad Moghadam have asserted that each of these groups' modus operandi more accurately fits the label of "insurgent organization"; referring to the combination of military and political tactics, the interest in gaining loyalty and legitimacy from the local population; the ability to control territory and govern and the simultaneous reliance on terrorism, guerrilla warfare and other asymmetric and unconventional tactics (Moghadam *et al.*, 2014).

Yet even this categorization may fall short of fully representing these groups' complex evolution. Insurgency, as irregular warfare,

“is defined as the use of violence by sub-state actors or groups within states for political purposes of achieving power, control and legitimacy, using unorthodox or unconventional approaches to warfare owing to a fundamental weakness in resources or capabilities” (Jordan *et al.*, 2008). Accordingly, insurgents rely on “protracted, asymmetric violence, ambiguity, the use of complex terrain (jungles, mountains, urban areas), psychological warfare, and political mobilization—all designed to protect the insurgents and eventually alter the balance of power in their favor”, while avoiding direct engagements (Metz and Millen, 2004). The emerging rebel governors analyzed considerably stretch the definition of insurgency.

Hezbollah is often cited as a new type of “quasi army”, capable of using force in hybrid ways and combining classic use of guerrilla warfare and irregular, asymmetric tactics with more conventional ones. The group initially confronted the Israeli presence in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war through a combination of asymmetric warfare and terrorism, including car bombings, suicide attacks and kidnappings. Between the late 1980s and the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon behind the “Blue Line” in 2000, Hezbollah implemented a strategy of attrition largely by conducting unconventional operations in the “security zone” against the IDF and the Southern Lebanese Army, a militia that acted as an Israeli proxy, and by launching rockets into northern Israel (Gabrielsen, 2014). Following 2000, Hezbollah’s military strategy began to shift from high mobility to holding ground, both by creating a complex system of underground tunnels and bunkers, as well as by investing in more conventional training (Gabrielsen, 2014). These changes became especially clear in the 2006 war with Israel, which revealed that Hezbollah had further transitioned from a non-conventional militia to a hybrid army (or “army without a state”) (Peters, 2006). In 2006 Hezbollah effectively relied on a combination of sub-conventional and conventional tactics while also investing in boosting its small units engaged in guerrilla warfare tactics with standoff weapons normally associated with conventional military forces (Johnson, 2011). This evolution has further continued since 2006, with Hezbollah increasing in size, upgrading its arsenal and infrastructure and investing in improving its war-fighting capabilities as well as its training and preparation for both more conventional engagements and for conducting cross-border operations into Israel (Beeston and Blanford, 2009; White, 2010). Since becoming involved in the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah’s role has encompassed direct military support to conduct both offensive as well as defensive operations, including key artillery support to the Syrian Army, confirming its hybrid warfare capabilities and “beyond insurgency” status (White, 2014).

Also Hamas’s use of force has evolved to merge insurgency and hybrid or semi-conventional tactics (Johnson, 2011). From an operational perspective, Hamas went from being a relatively unsophisticated violent faction perpetrating individual stabbing against Israelis to being able of carrying out both large-scale bombing attacks and rocket attacks into Israel. In the past decade Hamas’s *Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades* (al-Qassam Brigades or IDQB) further grew qualitatively and quantitatively, modeling themselves closer to a regular army organized in divisions; and partitioning the Gaza Strip into military districts. These organizational changes were implemented while investing in developing and upgrading the group’s arsenal and expanding in size (Aviad, 2009). Inspired by Hezbollah’s operational concept in the 2006 war with Israel, the Qassam Brigades have further transformed into a hybrid actor with high-combat skills that rely more on standoff tactics—in combination to ambushes, IEDs and suicide missions—to target and kill Israeli soldiers, as well as invest in both offensive as well as defensive tasks,

including in holding ground (Cohen, 2009; Shamir and Hecht, 2014).

ISIL’s use of violence can also be defined as hybrid, referring to its simultaneous use of irregular and unconventional as well as conventional tactics. On the one hand, the group has openly relied on indiscriminate attacks and “spectacular” sustained violence to create and maintain a situation of fear and instability, with the goal of creating chaos.<sup>4</sup>

Exemplary, in this sense, are the 2012–2013 campaigns in Iraq aimed at freeing jihadist prisoners in Iraqi jails and at attacking Iraqi security personnel, with the dual goal of spreading chaos and fear and swelling the group’s own ranks (Hashim, 2014). In a later stage of their evolution, ISIL also invested more substantially in organizing and carrying out classic international terrorist operations outside its core territorial stronghold.

However, it is also true that the group’s overall military strategy and approach has gone beyond that of a traditional insurgency or a classic terrorist organization. This was clear as early as 2010, when the then Islamic State of Iraq rose from its ashes under a new leader, the enigmatic “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”, and reorganized, professionalized and united the organization under a cohesive “Caliphate” project. Taking advantage of the gradual US withdrawal from Iraq, the exclusionary politics implemented by the Nuri al-Maliki government against Iraq’s Sunni community, the deterioration of security and governance and the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the Islamic State of Iraq started to maneuver itself back at the center of regional politics. The transition from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to ISIS or ISIL came shortly afterwards: following al-Baghdadi’s operatives’ creation of a jihadist group in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the latter’s refusal to obey al-Baghdadi’s orders and merge with ISI (Al-Tamimi, 2014). The failed merger led to a rift between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Baghdadi’s group, which re-branded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham/Syria, as well as between ISIL and al-Qaeda, which had explicitly opposed the merger (Bunzel, 2013). Strengthened by its campaigns in Syria and by the crumbling of the Levant, ISIL was able to up its military efforts, eventually shocking the world by assuming control of parts of northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq and, in June 2014, proclaiming itself to be the “Islamic State”, and announcing the birth of a new Caliphate under al-Baghdadi as Caliph (Bunzel, 2013).

Since the establishment of the “Caliphate” in the Spring of 2014 the group continued to rely on covert terrorist operations targeting civilians (al-Arabiya, 2015); while also engaging in violent reprisals and demonstrative acts of violence with the purpose of intimidating its adversaries and keeping the population at bay after gaining control of a village or town (Ahrum, 2015). At the same time, when studying the military evolution of the Islamic State project it is also evident that the way the group has sought to exploit chaos—namely, through extensive focus on controlling, defending and acquiring new territory—puts ISIL in an entirely different league when compared to “classic” terrorist organizations. The way Islamic State forces have been organized, institutionalized and equipped further supports the assertion that the group sees itself (and has sought to operate) like an “army” as well as an insurgency (Lockhar, 2014). ISIL’s fighting playbook has displayed hybrid characteristics: it has focused on holding ground and relied on infantry forces to patrol rural areas surrounding populated centers under its control; and it has at times manifested a bias towards offensive operations (a “cult of the offensive”) (Knights and Mello, 2015). Similarly, the group has combined brutality and indiscriminate violence with an insurgent strategy of attrition and semi-conventional defensive operations (Lister, 2014). In addition, the group’s distinct focus on setting-up provision of security further underscores its hybrid operational concept.

In the case of Hamas, Hezbollah or ISIS as NSAGs, it is possible to observe the growing blurring of insurgent and conventional tactics and the engagement in hybrid warfare, which “incorporate[s] a range of different methods of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formation, terrorist acts, including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder” (Schroefl and Kaufman, 2014). In turn, the hybrid character of these organizations’ military operations as well as their multi-layered structure show that their use of force is *sui generis* and challenges the assumption that non-state armed groups rely on force only in irregular or asymmetric ways.

### **Beyond Westphalian sovereignty: non-states to states?**

In addressing the evolving role of NSAGs in the MENA region, it is important to critically examine these actors’ shifting between violent and non-violent repertoires and to account for the increasingly more blurred reliance on unconventional and semi-conventional tactics. In this context, another key assumption that needs to be carefully scrutinized when it comes to NSAGs is the notion that these entities should be seen as “opposite” to the state, both in a functional and in a relational sense. In both cases, reality is far more complex and nuanced.

First, when it comes to complex non-state armed groups like Hamas, Hezbollah or even IS; it is evident that their social and political activities and involvement in governance are often not at all different from those performed by states. Indeed all these three organizations are involved in “rebel governance”—“the development of institutions and practice of rule to regulate the social and political life of civilians by an armed group” (Mampilly, 2011). In doing so, these groups developed some level of effective sovereignty—reflected in their capacity to ascertain control over territory and population—along with political and legal sovereignty, resulting in the ability to enforce “collectively binding rules to hierarchically coordinate the provision of common goods” (Asbach, 2006). When becoming involved in “rebel governance,” NSAGs develop different systems to ascertain both authority as control and authority as legitimacy (Snow, 1996). Whilst in theory it could be entirely possible for an armed group to preserve territorial and population control solely through coercion and to develop a purely predatory relationship with the people it rules; in practice such system would be highly costly to preserve. As such, numerous armed groups prefer to rely on a combination of coercion and co-optation and they focus on building authority and legitimacy by investing in the provision of security, social services and by fostering mechanisms for voluntary cooperation (Podder, 2014). In this context, discursive and symbolic politics are also used to project an image of effectiveness and legitimacy.

In other words, by developing complex and multi-layered approaches to rebel governance, non-state actors evolve functionally; and thus further blur the line between “state” and “non-state”, weakening the explanatory power of such dichotomy. At the same time, by creating alternative systems of governance and taking up functions traditionally ascribed to the state; these actors simultaneously challenge the state’s claim to exclusive sovereignty, while also seeking to reproduce and often mimic it.

This is certainly the case when looking at Hamas, a group that has over the years expanded its boundaries, developing certain attributes that are normally associated with state actors. This is because of a combination of chiefly two factors: its *de facto* running the Gaza Strip since its takeover in the summer of 2007 and its development of a self-standing welfare network involved in a vast array of social services. It is precisely this mix between grassroots social services, extra-institutional armed struggle,

institutional politics and *de facto* governance that places Hamas in an “in-between” hybrid position between state and non-state actor, and between social movement, political party and armed group. Hezbollah also blurs the line between state and non-state actor. At the most basic level, Hezbollah has developed and maintained a parallel social services network located in different areas of Lebanon where the group has strong influence and control. The sophistication of this network, matched with the level of territorial control the group has in the areas it informally administers, contribute to also define Hezbollah as a rebel ruler with state-like attributes (Flanigan, 2008). When it comes to the rise of the Islamic State, the group has strongly invested in creating and operating alternative spheres of authority that engage in competitive state-making. In the areas under the group’s control, IS has sought to be the “sovereign power”, focusing on holding a monopoly over the use of force and exercising control over territory and population.

Thus these groups all blur the lines between state and non-state actor through direct involvement in governance. What is more, the way these actors govern similarly questions the dichotomy between state and non-state: none of these NSAGs can be defined as applying a purely predatory and coercive model of governance. Even ISIL, with its strong recourse on brutality and its heavy extortion tactics with respect to the areas it controls, has done more than just acquire resources to finance its armed struggle. The governance project has also been aimed at building a new political order and shaping a new type of citizens. In other words, governance has aimed at establishing a new social contract, ascertaining legitimacy and authority and creating a new political order: representing thus a state-making endeavor.

Similarly, NSAGs cannot always be defined in opposition to the state in relational terms (Staniland, 2012). Here Hamas, Hezbollah and IS are especially interesting as they show substantial variation in their own relationship with both the state and the international order itself. In the cases of both Hamas and Hezbollah, both NSAGs’ politics are territorialized and grounded in a mix of religious and nationalist considerations. Also in both cases these groups’ involvement in autonomous armed struggle and rebel governance has gone hand-in-hand with participation in the political system through their political wings—alternating opposition to the political system with cooperation. For example, looking at the case of Hezbollah’s governance in Lebanon, the label of “state within a state” or “anti-state” is insufficiently nuanced to understand the *sui generis* status the group: nor only the relationship with the Lebanese state is not always (or even predominantly) one of antagonism and competition, but also, on the ground, governance is often shared between the state and the non-state actor and between institutional and grassroots political activities (Fregonese, 2012). Thus, even though Hezbollah’s autonomous military apparatus and extensive authority and control *de facto* represent a challenge to the state’s sovereignty—when constructed in a Westphalian sense—on the ground the relationship between the state and the non-state actor is not always zero-sum and competitive. In this sense, Hezbollah’s on the ground governance defies the expectations of non-state actors’ ruling to necessarily create a classic insurgent “shadow government” to operate in opposition to the state until finally taking over. Instead, what we have here is a more nuanced version of shared, hybrid sovereignty. The case of Hamas is equally complex, as the organization acts as the *de facto* government of the Gaza Strip—claiming legitimacy on the basis of having won the 2006 Palestinian Legislative elections. Yet at the same time, after its takeover in 2007, Hamas’s governance of the Strip occurs in a situation of conflict and opposition to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority. In this sense, the Islamic State lacks both Hamas’s and Hezbollah’s complex and dynamic relationship with

both institutional politics and the state and, instead, it presents a clearly anti-systemic and competitive nature with respect to both the state as well as the international political order. Indeed, the group's political project is conceived in opposition to the pre-established state-based regional political order and thus, for the group, the quest is not only to gain power and rule but also to deny (and if possible) destroy the incumbent political order. With its anti-systemic and revolutionary agenda, it is no surprise IS's relationship with regional states is also starkly adversarial. At the same time, IS can also be said to blur the lines between state-centered and non-state political activism, albeit in a very different way. The group indeed exists in two parallel and complementary dimensions: it certainly holds an institutional and territorialized political dimension, observed through its quasi state-building project in Syria and Iraq. But it also exhibits a de-territorialized, transnational and *sui generis* grassroots movement nature, one that both holds the promise of reconstruction of an extended "imagined community" (Jabareen, 2015) beyond borders, while seeking to reproduce itself by inspiring and setting-up other entities modeled after itself. In addition, much like the other groups, the type of sovereignty the group establishes in the territory under its control can be described as hybrid, multi-layered, and to some extent shared with pre-existing groups, tribes and families present on the ground.

Grasping the complex role NSAGs can play, beyond violence and beyond opposition to the state, can serve as a basis to question the often limited conceptual understanding of these actors, their role and their potential influence. Given the increasing role non-state armed groups are playing, both in the MENA region and globally, this discussion is both relevant and timely.

### Re-conceptualizing NSAGs in MENA

In the past decades, non-state actors in general and NSAGs more specifically have evolved in terms of political, social and military capabilities. This trend is evident in the Middle East and North Africa region, where a combination of state fragility, conflict and instability have provided fertile ground for armed groups to operate. Non-state armed groups in the Middle East are of course extremely diverse, ranging from local, self-defense and community-based militias, to transnational criminal organizations and networks, to classic insurgent opposition groups, just to name a few. Within this broad category, a number of non-state armed groups have evolved to undertake political, social and governance functions.

In doing so, these groups de facto challenge the conceptual boundaries of "non-state armed organization" as conventionally defined. Indeed, to properly understand how these groups operate, it is important to question some of the dominant assumptions with respect to armed groups, especially with respect to their use of force and their relationship with the state.

The article does so by focusing on Hamas, Hezbollah and the more recent Islamic State project. First, a cursory examination of these distinct groups highlights that, far from being defined mostly through the lens of their military apparatuses, these organizations should be understood at their core as hybrid entities—intertwining social, political and military activities. Similarly, an overview of all the three presented case studies' military evolution highlights how hybridity is also a core characteristic of their approach to armed force which, in different ways, challenges the assumption that NSAGs employ force only in irregular or asymmetric ways or solely within the framework of insurgent strategies.

In addition, the article examines how the carefully constructed dichotomy between state and non-state actors may similarly be insufficiently nuanced to grasp the evolution of these complex

*sui generis* groups. In a functional sense, the evolution of armed groups as rebel rulers across the MENA region blurs the line between state and non-state actors, with the latter increasingly involved in direct governance, as well as in ascertaining effective sovereignty in the areas they control. What is more, the reliance on control and governance to shape political institutions and build trust and legitimacy also highlights how governance is not only seen as an extraction tool but also as part of competitive state-building processes.

NSAGs should also not always be regarded in opposition to the state in a relational sense. Here the case studies show a substantial level of variation. On the one hand, ISIL can be identified as an anti-systemic, oppositional actor that not only fights all regional states but also denies the legitimacy of both all regional and the global state-based order. On the other hand, Hezbollah's administration of governance follows a dynamic of cooperation and competition with the state; along with a system that reproduces—rather than denies—the state.

In turn, this cursory examination highlights the limitations behind the main key assumptions inherent in the "non-state armed group" label; not only with respect to these actors' use of armed force but also with respect to the applicability of the state-non-state binary opposition generally theorized in the context of non-state actors in general and non-state armed groups more specifically. In this sense, the selected case studies show how the relational and functional opposition between "non-state armed groups" and states should not be assumed, especially when analyzing contexts characterized by conflict and state fragility. While not enough to discard the use of the term "non-state armed group" altogether; these considerations should however encourage questioning and revising some of the main assumptions inherent in this term while further reflecting on the broader theoretical and conceptual framework behind it.

### Notes

- 1 See Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State*, (I.B.Tauris, 1996).
- 2 In the past decade, a number of important studies have emerged documenting these groups' social, economic and political activities. See for example: Mishal and Sela (2000); Saad-Gorayeb (2002); Gunning (2004); Harb and Leenders (2005); Tamimi (2007); Gunning (2008); Roy (2011); Saouli (2011); Berti (2013); Cammett (2014); Berti (2015); Szekely (2015).
- 3 See Global Terrorism Database, University of Maryland. [http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?charttype=pie&chart=target&casualties\\_type=&casualties\\_max=&perpetrator=407](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?charttype=pie&chart=target&casualties_type=&casualties_max=&perpetrator=407).
- 4 See the inspirational jihadist text "The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass" (Idarat al-tawahush, akhtar marhalah satamurru biha al-Ummah) by Abu Bakr Naji, 2004 (Arabic) [https://pietervanos.taeyen.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/idarat\\_al-tawahush\\_-\\_abu\\_bakr\\_naji.pdf](https://pietervanos.taeyen.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/idarat_al-tawahush_-_abu_bakr_naji.pdf).

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**Data availability**

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

**Additional information**

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